

NEW LAWS CAN INCREASE HEAD START CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO DENTAL SERVICES

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Two bills became law at the end of the 2003 Oklahoma Legislative Session. HB 1443 and HB 1445 provide for improved access to oral health care for Oklahomans and create the opportunity for dental hygienists and dental assistants to play a new role in improving oral health in our state.

Oral health affects overall health, and tooth decay is the most common chronic childhood disease in America and accounts for 1.5 million days of missed school every year. Belinda Rogers, chair of the Oklahoma Oral Health Coalition has said that for children in low and moderate-income families, the number of school days missed because of dental problems is disproportionately higher than among other children.

The two new laws together allow for both dental hygienists and dental assistants to work outside the dental office in treatment facilities under the supervision of a dentist. The definition of treatment facilities includes "public or private schools, patient of record's private residence, accredited dental college, accredited dental hygiene program, or such other places as are authorized by the rules of the Board of Dentistry." This definition would include a Head Start center under the category of "public or private schools."

The laws allow dental hygienists to go to treatment facilities under the general supervision of a dentist, and it allows dental assistants under direct supervision to accompany a dentist to a treatment facility. The laws further provide an exception to general supervision of dental hygienists that allows a dentist to provide written authorization for the hygienist to perform procedures to a person on an initial visit in a treatment facility without the dentist having first examined the patient. The dental hygienist could not perform a second set of procedures without the authorizing dentist examining and accepting the patient for dental care.

This is good news for Head Start programs. The Oklahoma Health Care Authority has stated that an initial dental exam provided by a dental hygienist who has been authorized as described above does meet the EPSDT requirement for the child's first dental exam. This should assist programs in meeting the 45-day deadline for those examinations. The child will still need to be referred to a dentist for follow-up; the dental hygienist may not perform any more work on that child until authorized by the dentist who agrees to accept the child for care.

Head Start programs are encouraged to work with local dentists to explore ways to develop working relationships with the dentists, dental hygienists/and or dental assistants within the guidelines of these new laws.